

Relativism and Antirelativism: Is Full Understanding between Cultures Possible?

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The translation of a language into another presupposes that the translator understands the foreign expressions s/he is hearing or reading, assigning the correct meanings given the context at hand. Therefore, if mutual understanding could never be accomplished, we would get hopelessly lost in translation. Granted, we do seem to be able to translate each other fairly well, given that the verbal, economical, political exchanges occurring every day on an intercontinental level appear to reach their relevant aims. This is an important fact, which – as we will see below – may have important philosophical consequences. However, what could assure us of the fact that this is not just a fluke? How can we be certain that truly effective intercourse between cultures is not a mere illusion? Are we not unconsciously caught in a sort of cosmic deception – something like the nightmare the skeptic tells us we are trapped in? Let us pause for a moment to see how this might come about.

A full understanding between cultures implies that there is ‘common ground’ beneath them, i.e. a more or less wide core of shared concepts, beliefs and values. The philosophical position we may call *radical relativism* amounts to a denial of such common ground: according to the radical relativist, despite evidence to the contrary, every culture has its own network of beliefs and values, so that beliefs and values belonging to different cultures cannot be directly compared. A way to give substance to this position is gained by subscribing to the thesis of ‘equal validity’ (cfr. Boghossian 2006: 2), a thesis sometimes combined with *multiculturalism*. Multiculturalism is the view according to which every culture is good *in itself* and hence must be preserved. This is a very important claim from an ethical point of view, and it is hard to imagine how people would disagree – at least “people who stand within the ethical life” (Putnam 2004: 75). However, to this claim some multiculturalists add the thesis that any two beliefs on a given question arising from two different cultures are *equally* valid – which amounts to saying that neither of them is wrong, even though they literally contradict each other. The idea behind the thesis of ‘equal validity’ is that beliefs and values can only be assessed within the boundaries of the culture

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they come from. Hence, beliefs and values stemming from different cultures turn out to be *incommensurable* – they are *exclusively relative* to a culture, and this means that no belief and no value can acquire an absolute and universal validity. The notions of truth, objectivity, universality and absoluteness, therefore, do not have any content.

Moreover, it is not only that – on this reading – there is not such a thing as a belief being *true* or objectively, universally, absolutely *valid*. It is the very notion of ‘the world’ which ends up lacking any content. Stating how a particular aspect of the world is would therefore be a task which every culture tries to accomplish by exploiting its own procedures for the acquisition of knowledge. Given that these procedures differ from culture to culture, each will come up with its own peculiar world – to borrow a well-known expression of Thomas Kuhn’s, it is as if people belonging to different cultures inhabited different worlds (cfr. Kuhn 1962). The result is that the question ‘What is the world *actually?*’, independently and objectively, is one which makes absolutely no sense. Confronted with that question – given that a culture lacks any means to discern the difference between ‘reality as it appears to people’ (as their conceptual network makes it appear to them) and ‘reality as it actually is’ – one would be at a loss to answer.

What ensues from this picture of the human cognitive situation has a keen skeptical flavor. Given that a shared world capable of inflating shared meanings to linguistic expressions is not something foreseeable on the human existential horizon, cultures are doomed to be ‘cognitively closed’ to each other. Our more or less implicit belief that we are actually ‘in touch’ with one another on the intercultural level is but an illusion, and we find ourselves more or less in the predicament the Cartesian skeptic says we are in.

Notice that from what we have said so far it is possible to draw a parallel between relativism and skepticism. Indeed, both start by highlighting an undeniable state of affairs – people have different beliefs on the same topics. Both, then, deem it impossible to escape from a culture, as it were, to check which of two contradicting beliefs on a certain topic is true. Indeed, relativism and skepticism are stalwart allies in denying the existence of something like a *View from nowhere*, as it is sometimes called, which would allow one to objectively ascertain how things stand once and for all. Where they differ is in the diagnosis they offer of all this. According to skepticism, there are objective facts of the matter as to which of two contradicting beliefs is true – it is just that we cannot know them, because we may be brains in a vat, or living a perpetual dream, or playthings in the hands of a

malign supernatural creature. On the other hand, according to relativism there are no facts of the matter at all, neither knowable nor unknowable, and hence there is no possibility in principle to state which of two contradicting beliefs is the correct one – ‘correctness’ is merely an *intracultural* notion. As the reader will see below, the parallel between relativism and skepticism may turn out to be very useful in the treatment of the issue of translation and mutual understanding between cultures.

My treatment starts from a bundle of assumptions, which I shall leave untouched. First of all, I assume that the question of ‘relativism versus anti-relativism’ rests mainly on an epistemological level. This means that at the center of discussion there must be knowledge, its nature, the actual possibility human beings have to acquire it, and – at a metatheoretical level – the interpretation of epistemic concepts such as truth, rightness and certainty. Secondly, as one of the results of contemporary epistemology I assume the validity of *fallibilism*, the thesis according to which we have no right to consider the outcome of our best procedures for the acquisition of knowledge as *objectively* certain, i.e. beyond any conceivable doubt. Quite to the contrary, provided a doubt is reasonable and supported by sufficiently good arguments, no theory belief thesis or the like is immune to revision. In the third – and most important – place, I shall not argue against relativism, but restrict myself to simply assuming anti-relativism. This is partly because I have already presented some anti-relativistic arguments¹ and partly because anti-relativism seems to me to be the more plausible position, so that the burden of proof lies on the side of the relativist². We may say that, even though the arguments against relativism presented so far in the philosophical arena have not been so good, and even though in the future we will not have enough cleverness to produce a good anti-relativistic philosophical argument, the fact remains that we *do* understand each other on the intercultural level (a fact which the validity of fallibilism aids us to defend from any skeptical challenge).

Now, assuming anti-relativism means – among other things – believing that the notions of objectivity, absoluteness and universality have a genuine content, and hence that it is possible (in principle, at least) to utter propositions which are endowed with an objective, absolute and universal validity. Notice how strong this belief is in relation to absoluteness and universality. An ‘absolute’ proposition is one the validity of which is detached³ from any particular cultural framework – so that it imposes itself, as it were, on every framework – whereas a ‘universal’ proposition is one where validity is acknowledged within every cultural framework⁴. So,

denying relativism and its cognates represented by subjectivism and particularism, amounts to endorsing absolutism, objectivism and universalism⁵. However, given the assumptions mentioned above there may be a problem in correctly understanding the notions of absoluteness and universality. Why?

Thinking that absolutely and universally valid propositions exist seems to clash with the claim that no proposition is immune to revision. There is a widespread tendency to think that if a proposition – by its very nature – imposes itself all over the world becoming a common element of every cultural framework, then its fate is to remain steady forever, come what may. From this point of view, fallibilism seems to require that no proposition be absolute or universal. An aspect of the same tendency is that of interpreting what deserves the titles of “universal” and “absolute” as *ahistorical*, i.e. something the validity of which is not subject to the normal changes brought about by time, and hence inhabiting a special dimension surveying the developments of human events in history. This, for instance, is the way the Pope thinks the proper interpretation of anti-relativism has to be, given that he bases his attack on relativism on the existence of ‘immutable and ahistorical’ *universals*. This tendency apart, the interpretation of “universal” and “absolute” which it delivers appears too strong, for it is actually very hard – if not to say impossible – to maintain something ahistorical in epistemological matters. By the way, the conviction according to which this is the only possible conception of absoluteness and universality, combined with the conviction that ahistorical canons and values are humanly unattainable, may account for the popularity of relativism.

So, given the counter-intuitiveness of abandoning fallibilism, there seems to be a problem of compatibility between the reading of anti-relativism I am inclined to foster and the notions of absoluteness and universality. Because of this, for a long time I was tempted to drop the two notions and base my anti-relativism only on the notion of objectivity. Recently, however, I came to think that there is room for sound discussion about propositions being both absolute and universal. In what follows I shall sketch an argument which exploits the aforementioned similarity between relativism and skepticism, relying on the anti-skeptical stance formulated – independently of each other – by Charles Sanders Peirce and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and shows how ‘humanly conceivable’ notions of absoluteness and universality are possible.

The skeptic envisaged by René Descartes in the first pages of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* challenges us to show how to dispel a radical doubt which spreads across the board. Reality in its entirety is put in jeopardy by imagining that it is nothing but the outcome of the malicious actions of an evil genius, making us hallucinate the world as we experience. *Everything* is called into doubt, no aspect of reality is spared. At least from the time of Descartes onwards, philosophers have been confronted with the task of providing a valid reply to the radical skeptic, salvaging the effectiveness of our procedures for the acquisition of knowledge, or reluctantly subscribing to his sad picture of the human condition. The effort involved in giving a *direct* answer – a direct rejoinder amounting to a *confutation* of the skeptical argument – has turned out to be so important and, at the same time, difficult to provide, that the inability to give *proof* of the existence of things outside ourselves was held by Immanuel Kant to be a ‘scandal’ for philosophy (Kant 1781, B, XI, Preface to the second edition). But we need not give such a pessimistic diagnosis. Echoing Martin Heidegger – who claimed that the real scandal resides in the fact that some philosophers feel the need for such proof (Heidegger 1927, I, 6, 43, a) – a group of philosophers thinks it possible to give an *indirect* answer to the radical skeptic, not ‘proof’ but a sufficiently cogent argument good enough to confound the skeptic.

One of the first philosophers to put forward such an indirect kind of anti-skeptical answer is Peirce, who called attention to the fact that no doubt is good for its own sake. The act of doubting is of the utmost importance for the development of knowledge, but one must have a plausible reason in order to raise a doubt. We are not allowed to cast doubt on *everything*, unless we have a good enough reason to do so, and a reason justifying a hyperbolic doubt is difficult to envisage – a real, live doubt must have a relevance to our everyday practice. What difference does it make to us to put our belief in the existence of the world into question? What difference does it make to doubt, for instance, the belief that other people have a real physical body? How is our whole cognitive situation bettered by this? In the absence of proper answers to these questions, all the commonsense beliefs we usually take for granted represent a strong enough bedrock on which to build step by step the edifice of human knowledge, and we are justified in taking these basic beliefs as *certain*⁶, i.e. beyond doubt – as long as they show themselves to be cognitively useful (cfr. Peirce 1905).

Quite independently of Peirce, some years later Wittgenstein claimed the skeptic is wrong, in that he has to implicitly presuppose the existence of a

firm foundation of certain quasi-propositions and quasi-beliefs in order to even have meaningful language and raise – among other things – his doubts⁷. The prefixes “quasi-” point out that the nature of the elements which compose the foundation of human knowledge is distinct from the usual epistemic elements (beliefs and propositions) by means of which we express the knowledge we possess. Indeed, Wittgenstein discloses a gap between the foundation of knowledge – which for him is what *certainly* amounts to – and knowledge itself. But, this important detail aside, he joins Peirce in sheltering knowledge from the skeptic’s attacks and claiming that all those (quasi-)beliefs we do not have any plausible reason to doubt are instances of genuine certainty – making it clear moreover that the elements of the foundation are not ‘eternal’, but may lose their privileged status and possibly decay (cfr. Wittgenstein 1969).

Now, the connection with the interpretation of the notions of absoluteness and universality is straightforward – it consists in applying the Peirce-Wittgenstein thesis on an intercultural level. Thus, according to this thesis, just as all those beliefs which we do not have any plausible reason to deny count as *certain*, so all those beliefs and values which nobody has any reason to doubt – irrespectively of the culture s/he who is analyzing this belief belongs to – count as *absolute* and *universal*. And there are many. Many beliefs and judgments about a given intercultural relevant topic about which nobody – in any culture – possesses at present a reasonable counterargument. Beliefs and judgments of this kind, then, *are* absolutely and universally valid – even though, if need be, revisable.

In conclusion, contrary to the tendency we detected above, there is room for discussion about universality and absoluteness – these concepts *do* possess a genuine content. This suffices to defeat radical relativism and deny the related idea of ‘incommensurability’, allowing us to say that full understanding between cultures is possible – and hence translation which does not amount to a fluke but is really effective⁸.

Note

¹ See for example Dell’Utri (2007: 71-89), and Dell’Utri (2008).

² Perhaps it is patently wrong to talk of “proof” here – maybe the inability we have shown so far to provide proof of the actual possibility of mutual understanding and translation (and, for that matter, proof of the existence of the external world – see below in the text) stems from nothing but an intrinsic insurmountable *limit* of reason. If this is so, given that the evidence at hand puts the two contradicting hypotheses on the same level and gives them the same probabilities to be true, a possible route to take is to choose the more convenient position reasoning along the lines of an enlightened better. In the film *Ma nuit chez Maud* (1969) by Eric Rohmer, a character – Vidal, a professor in philosophy and an out-and-out Marxist – uses a nice version of the wager Blaise Pascal formulated (in his *Pensées* 233) about the existence of God. Vidal applies the wager to the existence of a sense in history, and claims that the balance is in favor of the latter even if the probabilities were 10 percent in favor of the existence and 90 percent in favor of the non-existence of such a sense. It is just more expedient to do so, it is the only choice which allows us to draw close to genuine bliss in our lives – even if the probabilities are smaller, the gain is greater. In the same vein, one could say that betting on the truth of anti-relativism is the choice to take, since it is anti-relativism which affords us the greater gain. Should we lose, we would have been ineffectively working for better cooperation between cultures – all in all, we would not lose a lot; if we were to win, we would be leading a life powered by the real possibility of having enriching relations with foreign people.

³ As the etymology of the adjective ‘absolute’ would have it.

⁴ The very similar destiny, so to speak, of the propositions which are absolute and of those which are universal accounts for the fact that they are often taken on a par.

⁵ As usual, we are taking ‘relative’, ‘subjective’ and ‘particular’ as the opposite of ‘absolute’, ‘objective’ and ‘universal’, respectively.

⁶ “Certain” from a *subjective* point of view, and hence *temporarily* certain – until new evidence is acquired which can give a reason to doubt them.

⁷ Thus, in a sense the skeptical challenge is self-refuting, according to Wittgenstein.

⁸ I wish to thank Stephen L. White for useful discussions on the topic of this paper.

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